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ABSTRACT

A collection of three excerpted stories is provided in this paper about cross-cultural communication. The paper presents excerpts from papers written as assignments by teacher/students in a course about first and second language development. In the paper's first excerpt, Angela Jordahl tells about her involvement with Kurdish students in a cross-cultural experience that moved them from the school to a beauty salon in "A Hair Cutting Experience." The paper's second excerpted author, Karen Nordvall, who teaches English as a second language in Bismarck, North Dakota, at an adult learning center, describes "A Visit to a Ukrainian Family" motivated by the need to assess the relationship between home and school on behalf of a child. In the paper's third excerpt, "A Conference Presentation in Mexico," Jackie Wilcox, the director of the secondary Bilingual Education Program at Solen-Cannonball on the Standing Rock Reservation, North Dakota, relates a story of planned and unplanned professional development while attending a science education conference in Oaxtepec, Mexico. (CR)

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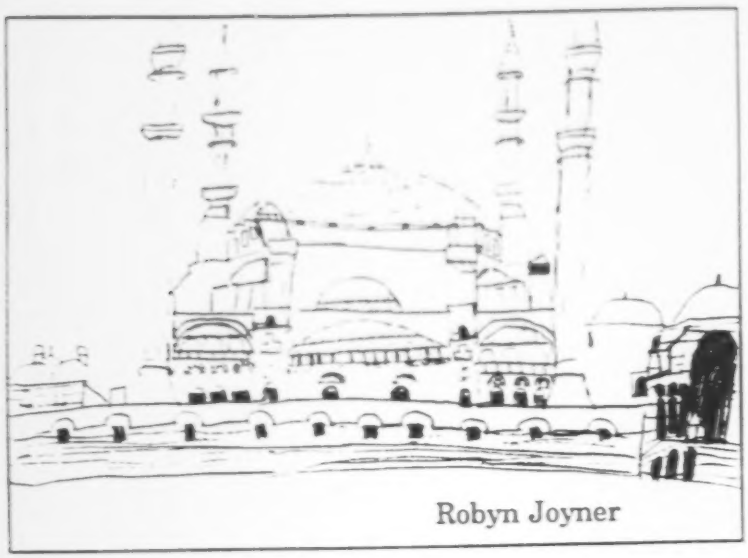

Robyn Joyner

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TEACHER STORIES OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

by

Angela A. Jordahl, Karen Nordvall, and Jackie Wilcox

with an introduction by
Mary McDonnell Harris

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INSIGHTS into open education

TEACHER STORIES OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

By Angela A. Jordahl, Karen Nordvall, and Jackie Wilcox

with an introduction by
Mary McDonnell Harris
University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, ND

Introduction

Two years ago I taught a course about first and second language development to North Dakota teachers who are involved in Project Star, a statewide professional development initiative of the Office of Bilingual and Minority Language Affairs of the U.S. Department of Education.

Early in the course, I asked everyone to write a brief reflective paper after at least two hours of listening to an unfamiliar language. The teachers approached this assignment in different ways. Some rented videotapes of foreign films; some listened to instructional audiotapes; a few attended university language classes; some visited in the homes of their students. A few recalled past experiences which met the assignment specifications.

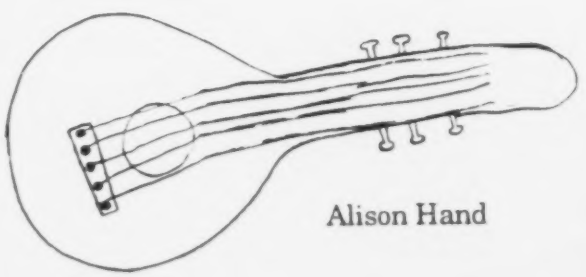
The papers based on memories stood out for being "good stories." Three of them are shared here in excerpted form. The detailed observation of language features and listener reactions required in the assignment have been edited to enhance the narrative qualities of the work. What appears here are three stories told by teachers about cross-cultural communication.

"A Hair Cutting Experience" tells about Angela Jordahl's involvement of her Kurdish students in a cross-cultural experience that moved them from the school to a beauty salon. Angie teaches English as a Second Language in the Fargo, ND, public schools.

Karen Nordvall teaches English as a Second Language in Bismarck, ND. Although she is assigned to an adult learning center, Karen works with the whole family. Her story describes a visit to a Ukrainian home motivated by the need to assess the relationship between home and school on behalf of a child.

Jackie Wilcox presents a story of planned and unplanned professional development while attending a science education conference in Oaxtepec, Mexico. At that time, Jackie was science teacher and director of the secondary Bilingual Education Program at Solen-Cannonball, on the Standing Rock Reservation in southcentral North Dakota. She is currently a doctoral student at UND.

–Mary McDonnell Harris



Alison Hand

A Hair Cutting Experience

by

Angela A. Jordahl

It may sound strange, but I spent many hours discussing what haircuts and beauty salons are all about, finally taking four students to get their hair cut in a beauty salon.

This came about in the course of teaching a health class to four Kurdish students. We began discussing the concept of personal hygiene. The students were fascinated when I described all my "rituals" that I do every morning before coming to school. No one had ever explained to them the process of cleaning contacts, or using styling gel, or applying make-up. In describing my morning "rituals," my students became more inquisitive about how to take care of their own hair properly. They asked questions such as, "Why do you go and get your hair cut?" and "Do you wash your hair every day?" and "Does it hurt when you color your hair?" As a result of their questions, I decided that this was a topic that needed to be addressed. And I had a few questions of my own for the Kurdish students such as, "Have you ever had your hair cut in a beauty salon?" and "Who cuts your hair?" and "Are there Kurdish traditions about women cutting their hair?"

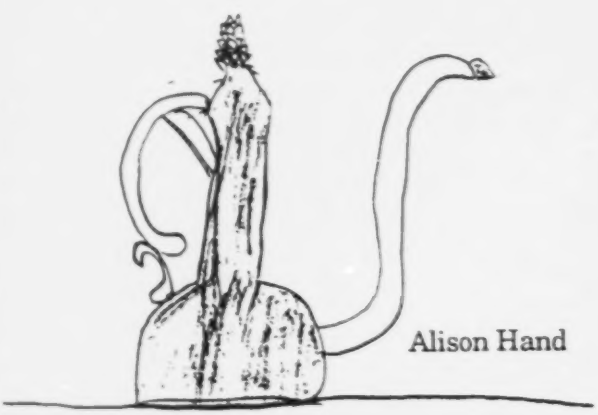
As the discussion continued, the students became more and more interested in learning about proper hair care and what a beauty salon is all about. However, I decided that we should start with the history and traditions of the Kurdish culture. Throughout the discussion, which lasted over a period of five or six thirty-minute class sessions, the students would often change into their first language of Kurdish.

In the Kurdish culture it is the custom for all women to have long hair. The longer a woman's hair, the more beautiful she is considered. I informed my students that having a regular haircut can help the condition and growth of one's hair, even when growing hair out. As a result, my students wanted to know why some American women have chosen to cut their hair and have a short hair style. At this point the students lapsed into their native language and began laughing. Later, they told me that they were talking about some funny looking women that they had seen on television with short hair. The students explained that it was easier to discuss these matters in their native language because they didn't know the correct way to express themselves in English. I had to laugh myself when they told me this.

In the Kurdish culture there is one man who is usually under the age of 30 who cuts the hair for all the men, women, and children in a group of families. Sometimes, but not always, the families are related. The haircutting is usually done in the basement of a house with a razor, not a pair of scissors. My students had difficulty with the term razor and had to go back and forth continually from Kurdish to English to come up with the term that best described what the man uses when he cuts hair. Their apparent struggle with this term made me aware that not every word can be translated from one language to another.

After we decided on the term razor, the students began speaking Kurdish again. I noticed that their speech had slowed and that their facial expressions were not as happy as they had been earlier, and I asked why. They told me they were embarrassed because a man cut their hair in a basement of a house. They said they wanted to have their hair cut in a beauty salon just like American girls. Of course, their first worry was the cost. I told them that I had a friend who was a hair stylist and that

perhaps she could cut their hair for a reduced price. Once again they switched into their native language, and their faces were filled with excitement and joy. They wanted to know if we could go after school. I explained to them about the need for an appointment. One of the brighter students in the group then explained to the other students in Kurdish that an appointment was when your dad called on the telephone to arrange a time to go to the doctor. I said that was a good example but that I, not their dad, would be making the appointment and that we wouldn't be going to the doctor but to the beauty salon. They all laughed and enjoyed my explanation. I told them to go home and discuss it with their parents and have them sign a permission slip.



Alison Hand

The day finally arrived and my students' faces were now beginning to fill with fear. They kept reassuring each other in Kurdish that this was something that they wanted to try. However, at one point I thought I would have to cancel the appointment. We all piled into my car after school and took off for the beauty salon. As we traveled from Fargo to Moorhead one of my students told me that she had never been on the highway before or even into Moorhead (from Fargo to Moorhead is under five miles). As we drove, the students were talking a mile a minute in Kurdish and their voices were filled with fear, anxiety, and excitement. I couldn't help but smile as the students talked among themselves. When we arrived at the beauty salon the students didn't want to go in. They stood almost paralyzed in the entryway, whispering to each other to go in. Finally I persuaded one of the students to enter. She began to talk frantically to the others, and finally all the students were in the salon and ready to begin their haircut experience. They did not speak a lot to the stylist as she washed and cut their hair; they only spoke to each other and only in Kurdish. Not until it was over did the students begin to speak in English, thanking the stylists for the haircut and style. They were excited to look at each other and made many comments in their language. The students wanted to know if I would be next. I told them that I had not made an appointment for myself, only them. They laughed and retold the story about how one of the students explained how to make an appointment in Kurdish. I didn't need to ask what they were talking about for I knew, and I laughed with the girls.

As a result of this language experience I have come to realize that bilingual students return to their native language for a sense of security. They count on their language to explain terms, events, and happenings that they don't understand and are not comfortable with in English.

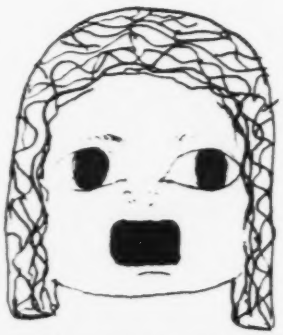
I feel that the more teachers get to know their bilingual students the easier it is to understand what they are saying in their native language. I believe that language and cultural misunderstandings diminish when teachers take the time to know and understand their students and their personalities. Due to everyday experiences with my multicultural students and the Project Star classes, I believe that I am becoming a better elementary teacher, ESL teacher, and a more culturally aware person. I love teaching ESL!!!

A Visit With a Ukrainian Family

by

Karen Nordvall

My work regularly places me in situations in which people speak a language which I do not understand. Usually, these encounters are pleasant and congenial, and some are social gatherings. However, in some instances, I must get beyond the pleasantries and accomplish a communicative task. That's when it gets interesting! In the specific instance that I am going to describe, I needed to get approval from a Ukrainian family to place their eight-year-old boy in special reading and also have him evaluated for hearing loss. As I sat in their home, the conversation swung back and forth between my simplified, gesticulated English and their rapid Ukrainian. I realized that they could be saying anything to the child about me or my ideas and I would have no chance of rebuttal or clarification. Certainly this is what the refugee feels when he or she is in that curious situation of being *in* a conversation that is also *about* them. The question that must always be in the mind of the person is one of trust.



Noelle Solseng

The element of trust cannot be underestimated. This enables the persons involved to both relax about the content of what is being said in another language and to understand the communicative task at hand in limited English. The potential for hearing and comprehending another language seems to be greatly enhanced by a quiet, non-threatening setting. In this regard, I never refuse food or a cup of anything that is offered. The concept of "breaking bread" together fosters this sense of trust and enables me to distance myself from my professional duties and become a friend.

To be truthful, though, I myself often feel a bit of panic at these times. I am only too aware of the cultural and language chasms that exist in the room. The frustrations that arise when two human beings long to connect but cannot make my hands perspire and my voice rise. Sometimes as I leave, I actually feel that my ears are tired from straining to catch any little clue to meaning. The closest analogy to the feeling of helplessness would be an experience of trying to understand a toddler with an urgent but unintelligible message. However, a familiar child has needs which a parent can at least hope to guess at, intervene in, and supply. Of course, my refugees are adults and my equals. They are well aware of their own needs, have their own world view on solutions, and realize more sharply than I do the intricate complexities of life in America.

I have found that a visual aid, such as a form to complete, can be both a hindrance and a help. Because of all the bureaucracy that surrounds education, refugee parents have seen a lot of paper and signed a lot of documents they didn't fully understand. I hate to come with one more! There are also cross-cultural factors that come into play. Many refugees have a mistrust of printed matter, based on their experiences with government and the press. Others are illiterate, even in their own language. (I even struggle with the English concept of signature—should an Arabic writer have to relearn to sign his/her own name?) And everyone seems to find printed matter in

English to be intimidating, due in no small part to the fact that most school-home communication is phrased in the most high-level wording possible.

On the other hand, some of my refugee friends read English better than they speak it. In that case, a visual of some sort is a help. Often, they can quickly go to their dictionaries to look up words which they do not know.

For the specific incident which I wish to relate here, I went to the home of a Ukrainian family to "talk" with them about their middle son, Yeveniy, who had decided on his own to be called George. He was a delightful boy. However, his progress in learning English was lagging. In comparison to his older brother, who was literate in Ukrainian before coming to America, George was getting nowhere with reading. At first I had attributed his difficulties to his pre-literate stage, but it became apparent something else was wrong. He was eager to read. When I had arranged for a summer volunteer reading tutor for another child, he had simply shown up beside him with his face scrubbed and his school clothes on, begging to be included. The volunteer confirmed my fears that George just wasn't learning to read. She felt that he would be lost and frustrated in second grade. I decided I would go out on a limb with my principal and discuss these concerns with the parents.

Armed with forms and permission slips, I sat in their cozy living room on one of the mismatched cast-off sofas. The children were at ease and delighted to see me, and the parents were very congenial. I was there without an interpreter.

It soon became clear that they were well aware that the school didn't have the full picture on George, but they had no idea of the extent of our concern or that we had resources to help. They also had no experience in communicating their concerns. I was stunned at how important it was for me to serve as an advocate for their children!

First, with much gesturing and flipping through dictionaries, they told me that George had had a difficult birth. He had a history of ear infections, and subsequent periods of hearing loss. There were gaps that they had noticed in his *Ukrainian* vocabulary (I had suspected this from my little you-teach-me-your-names-of-the-animals game).

Even more startling, they welcomed the idea of retention in first grade. In fact, it turned out that he was the only member of a large number of cousins who had been placed on grade level, rather than one year behind. (I later found out that the principal had placed him there because of the convenience of class size!) Both George and his parents wanted to make the switch immediately, since they were moving to a new school area.

I did my best to explain the ear/eye test permission form and decided to wait with other forms until the ear test results were in. (It turned out that he did need "tubes.") George was also placed in special reading and did well in first grade; he was so proud that he could actually read!

My Saturday visit was well worth the time! I doubt that this rather intimate information would have been shared if the meeting had taken place on "my turf" in the school. Also, both parents worked long hours and were afraid to ask their employers for time off for school appointments.

There is much more that I can learn from further experience in cross-language communication. In spite of the frustrations and the fear that I will say something truly stupid and inappropriate, it is worth the risk. Many refugees are lonely and enjoy visitors.

However, I have learned that when, as a teacher, I have a specific task to accomplish, I need to plan my home visit well and stay on task. When possible and appropriate, a visual of some sort can be helpful. I have also found that trust is an important component and a two-way street. I have to do everything that I can to show that I am a trustworthy "official" from the school, and I have to believe that these parents can be valued members of the educational team.

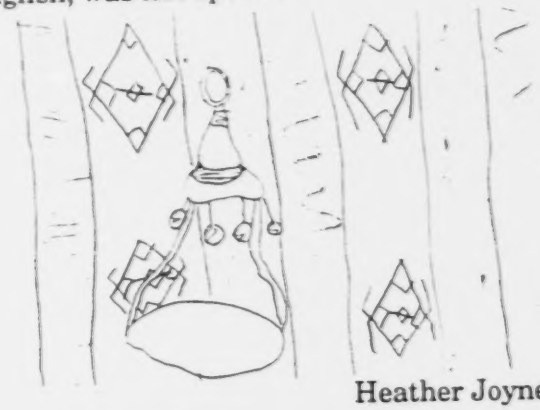
A Conference Presentation in Mexico

by

Jackie Wilcox

In the summer of 1993, I was invited to participate in an International Science Teachers Conference in Oaxtepec, Mexico, both as a presenter and an exhibitor. At first, I was hesitant to attend because I do not speak Spanish, but I was assured that there would be interpreters at the conference and people at the airport to help me. So I accepted the invitation and looked forward to a new adventure.

The airplane ride from Chicago to Mexico City was my introduction to immersion in another language. Nobody in my area of the plane spoke English so I could not converse with anyone and share my nervousness. Upon landing in Mexico City, we were taken to an area to retrieve our luggage and go through customs. After some confusion, I discovered that my suitcase was still in Chicago; however, I would still have to go through customs with my science boxes. The inspector asked what was in the boxes and I tried to explain, but the guard who was at the entrance to the customs area did not understand very much English. I kept trying to explain that it was junk—toilet paper tubes, cotton balls, insulating materials, etc. Both the customs guard and I were getting frustrated by this time, and I was near tears. Luckily, a bilingual man came along and explained in Spanish to the official, and I was able to proceed without unpacking my containers. By this time, I was so upset, I had trouble finding my way to the main terminal where I was to meet the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) delegation. I was so relieved and excited to see the NSTA sign and to be able to speak to others that would understand me after only experiencing 45-60 minutes in a situation where my language, English, was not spoken.



Heather Joyner

The conference was held in a government resort complex about 60 miles south of Mexico City. There was a mixture of both Spanish and English speakers, with the majority speaking Spanish. Many of the English speakers were bilingual. I was representing the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES) at the conference and had a display booth to promote the organization and its products. Originally, a fellow AISES member, who spoke Spanish, was to have attended with me but due to a family emergency did not make it. Most of the people who stopped by the booth spoke only Spanish. I found it very difficult to try to explain the science materials, and I kept trying to find ways to do it. I found myself speaking more loudly than normal, talking more slowly, and of course gesturing a lot.

When someone was really persistent about obtaining more information, I would go to some of the other display booths and find someone who was bilingual. Luckily, I found them very willing to help out.

One of the greatest learning experiences in my teaching career was my science presentation at the conference. I had all Mexican teachers, non-English speakers, at the session. We did hands-on science activities—ice cube insulation, cylindrical mirrors, irregular balance boards, and kaleidoscopes. I had an interpreter for the session, but he got so involved with the experiments that he would forget to interpret most of the time. I could see the lack of understanding in the eyes of the teachers when I first started the experiments, but as we got into the activities there was laughing and talking as they were busy making things and trying things out. I had a throng of people around me trying to show me what had happened or how things worked, all of them speaking in Spanish. We were able to communicate though. At the end of the session I gave everything away because they were able to tell me through limited English or the interpreter that they needed simple supplies like tape. I was given applause, hugs, and, most of all, was lauded with shouts of TEACHER, TEACHER. It was heartwarming! I wanted the teachers to be able to use and share these activities with others so, before I left, I had the activities printed in Spanish. This also excited those who attended.

Many things surface in my mind from this Mexican experience relating to language teaching and learning. Entering a world where a language other than English is spoken is an experience that can give insight in language learning to a monolingual English speaker. However, sudden, total immersion in another language can be so overwhelming that it may prevent a person from grasping even the simplest words or concepts. Establishment of a comfort zone is needed before language learning can begin to occur. The first words that are acquired in a new language situation are those needed for survival. I feel that immersing people in another language for long periods at one time will not help them learn the language faster. I was in a situation for five days where Spanish was spoken to me and around me the majority of the time. I did not rapidly learn Spanish words, although I did pick up some basic understanding of what was being said and what certain words meant. When I had been immersed in an unknown language for longer than three hours, I began to feel frustrated with my inability to communicate.

Science activities appear to be something that can be taught and learned regardless of language differences. It could be an academic area where terms and concepts could be learned in more than one language at the same time. Hands-on activities provide a comfort zone where understanding of a concept can be shared without language. Language learning could benefit from an activity based program.

Noelle Solseng

Heather Joyner

REQUEST FOR MANUSCRIPTS

In our 1996-97 volume of *Insights*, we will, in addition to our usual very open format, also be exploring three themes.

A first theme will explore bridging gaps between teachers and other adult players in the world of schools. How can teachers forge better and more constructive relationships with parents? With administrators? With other teachers?

Deadline for manuscripts: August 31, 1996.

We are interested in hearing about teaching strategies for engaging students in discovery learning experiences. Subjects might include (but are not limited to) hands-on science projects, interdisciplinary learning units, independent research assignments, or descriptions of emergent curriculum projects. The description may be drawn from early education, elementary, middle school, or secondary experience. What happens when students become the architects and engineers of their own learning? Let us know.

Deadline for manuscripts: December 20, 1996.

We are also interested in hearing about issues and classroom practices that relate to the inclusive classroom. True inclusion of the full diversity of children in classrooms is not always easy, and we continue to talk with teachers who are either frustrated by or proud of their work in this area. We'd love to hear about your classroom practices that are working.

Deadline for manuscripts: February 28, 1997.

We invite educators at all levels to submit manuscripts for publication in these or related areas. We hope to have one or two issues focusing on each of the above three themes, but we continue to look for manuscripts of all kinds and on all topics that provide reflective reading for educators.

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